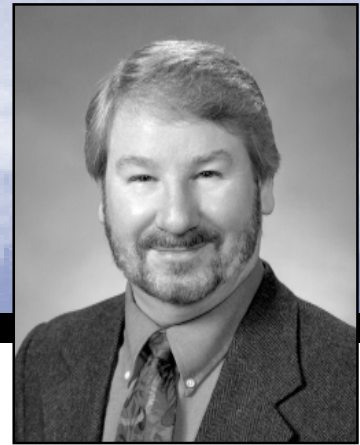




Alex Wood

State Representative

3rd District



Committees & Appointments

- Commerce & Labor (vice chair)
- Technology,
Telecommunications & Energy
- Transportation
- Legislative Transportation
Committee
- State Gambling Commission
- Agency Council on Coordinated
Transportation

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<http://www.leg.wa.gov>

State Web Page:

<http://access.wa.gov>

Report from Olympia

Dear Friends:

The 2001 session is finally over, and what a session it was. Sessions, actually, since there were three special sessions in addition to our 105-day regular session.

The standard line about the 2001 Legislature is that it was about only one issue – transportation – and that it was a colossal flop. I won't argue that this was the best session ever, but I think we're missing the mark if we dismiss everything that happened.

Yes: Transportation problems are still at a crisis level And no, we weren't able to overcome the partisanship that hindered our search for a workable solution.

But while transportation negotiations were stalled, lawmakers were making headway on energy, on education, on foster-care reform, on pipeline safety and long-term care for seniors and disabled persons. We topped all that off with a no-new-taxes operating budget.

It's clear that next session, we've got to deal with transportation, as well as some other unfinished issues, such as real accountability in our schools. With your input and support, I believe we'll get there. In the meantime, thanks once again for allowing me to work for you in Olympia.

Sincerely,

Alex Wood
State Representative
Third Legislative District

Energy problems challenge Washington

Depending on who's talking, the energy problems that hit Washington state this past fall and winter can be blamed on California's failed experiment in deregulation... on the drought that impacted our ability to generate hydroelectric power... on us having too few generating plants... or on the Feds.



As a member of the House Technology, Telecommunications & Energy Committee, I think the answer is that all of the above, and more, combined to drive up our historically affordable energy prices. But our job wasn't to sit over in the Capitol and place blame; our job was to address the problems that affected every family and business in the state.

My committee did so, and the solutions we proposed were approved by the Legislature and signed into law by Governor Locke. The omnibus energy package we produced, House Bill 2247, will:

- ✓ Diversify energy supplies by requiring utilities to give customers a choice of power generated by solar, wind and other renewable sources;
- ✓ Reform the powerplant siting process to bring plants on line more quickly;
- ✓ Help older plants produce more energy without producing more air pollution by providing tax incentives for voluntary pollution control;
- ✓ Help aluminum companies and other big energy users build their own generating plants – saving jobs in the process;
- ✓ Make government agencies more energy efficient; &
- ✓ Provide millions of dollars in emergency energy assistance to low-income families.

That last item – financial aid to help struggling families keep the lights on – was the goal of HB 1443, one of the first bills I proposed this session. HB 1443 was later rolled into the omnibus energy package, HB 2247. I'm proud that the work we did will provide up to \$5 million over the next two years to the folks who have been hardest hit by rising energy bills.

Water reform, finally

Water is a primary building block of life . . . and it's a necessity for Washington families, natural resources, and farms and other businesses. I'm happy to report that, after six years of work, the Legislature this year approved significant water-policy reforms. The new law is built upon six mainstays:

- A key provision separates the water-rights process into "two lines" — one line reserved for transferring or changing an existing right, and the other for processing new applications.
- Local watershed-planning groups will see more funding to guarantee water flow for fish, and water quality for people.
- Opportunity and accountability is boosted for water-conservancy boards as they make recommendations on water-rights changes and transfers.
- New policy sets more protection for family farms outside urban-growth boundaries.
- Local water utilities can use utility-tax incentives for conservation and re-use.
- We've streamlined the cumbersome process for donating water to increase in-stream flow — and we've set up incentives to conserve water.

Education – our top priority

As I said, one of the session's successes was education. Some are saying that the 2001-03 budget we passed is the best budget for education in decades. It emphasizes improving teaching and leadership in schools, continuing education reform, and strengthening accountability efforts. It also addresses the voter-approved Initiatives 728 and 732.



- Per pupil spending rises from \$5009 to \$5315 in 2002, then to \$5484 in 2003.
- \$393.3 million for the new Student Achievement Program.
- \$318.4 million for K-12 state-funded staff cost-of-living increases over the next two years.

Report from Olympia

- \$82.5 million to continue the class-size reduction and extended learning components of the Better Schools Fund.
- \$2.8 million in focused assistance for consistently low-performing schools.
- \$6.6 million for increased school safety, including \$500,000 to develop a plan to prevent school bullying and harassment.

I wouldn't call this a "perfect" budget. I was disappointed that the Legislature wasn't able to provide raises for all teachers – although it must be remembered that the 1999-2000 Legislature granted teachers the most significant salary increase in state history. I was also disappointed when the House and Senate couldn't agree on a school accountability bill. But all things considered, this is a great budget for our kids and educators alike.

Maintaining health care services

In spite of some preliminary budget proposals that could have cut big holes in the medical safety net, we were successful in continuing services for our most vulnerable citizens. All eligible children who apply for the Children's Health Insurance Program will be able to enroll. Medicaid benefits will be available to low-income women with breast or cervical cancer. Persons with disabilities who are able to return to work will be able to keep their much-needed Medicare coverage. We kept the adult dental, medically indigent and adult day care programs and gave long-term caregivers a much-needed 50 cents-an-hour raise.

All that said, we can't ignore the fact that health-care inflation is growing dangerously fast, about 13% annually. So while every positive move we made this session is a plus, one of our most important continuing tasks is to get costs under control, so that the people who need health care – and that's every one of us – can afford it.

A Fair Deal for Foster Kids

We've seen far too many disturbing headlines in the last few years about children being injured or abused while under state care. We've also heard heart-wrenching stories both from foster children and from foster parents themselves.

We've responded by reducing caseloads for CPS workers and supporting DSHS in its efforts to upgrade our foster care system so that it will merit certification by a national child-welfare organization. We were

also able to increase what we currently pay foster parents, and to guarantee them a short respite from their responsibilities each month – something that is especially important for foster parents of high-need kids.



And finally, because children leaving foster care to take up independent living are taking such a critical step, we've tapped into some federal funds that will allow us to provide transition assistance for foster kids who "age out" of the system.

Identity Theft

Washington has the dubious distinction of a top-10 ranking per-capita in cases of identity theft, an old crime made more likely and more damaging by the Internet. Identity thieves can access other people's personal information by the old-fashioned way of running through the victim's garbage – or by the modern way of searching for details on the Internet. One common element to these crimes is that they frequently target vulnerable citizens – the very folks likely to have the hardest time setting things straight.

Last year we determined that the type of driver's license issued by Washington state was one weak link in the privacy chain. We passed a law requiring the digitized licenses that have appeared within the last few months. These new licenses are much more difficult to counterfeit or alter. And this year, we passed a bill that Attorney General Christine Gregoire calls "the toughest in the nation" to help protect Washington citizens from a crime that occurs more and more frequently every year. It increases penalties and helps victims re-establish their credit, and their hard-earned good names.

Fixing the transportation mess

There's no doubt about it. The actions by some members of the Legislature to block a new transportation plan for the state were irresponsible, regardless of their party or political ideology. Our state's infrastructure has always taken precedence over partisan posturing and politicking – until now. As a result of this new attitude, the economy of the entire state has been put at risk.

State Representative **Alex Wood**

The Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation – a bipartisan group of civic and business leaders from across the state – studied our transportation system and needs for almost two years. The Commission made a set of recommendations on what was needed to get Washington moving again. The recommendations ranged from increasing the gas tax to improving efficiencies to letting regions of the state fund and solve their own worst problems.



Fellow members of the House Transportation Committee and I tackled the question of increased efficiencies first. As a result, two very significant reforms – the “design-build” law and a permit-streamlining measure – are now the law of the land. When it came to the Commission’s other recommendations, House Democrats, Senate Democrats, and Senate Republicans were prepared to take the hard votes to get Washington moving again. Unfortunately, the surreal situation created by the 49-49 tie in the House allowed House Republican leaders to throw up a roadblock to further progress. Instead of a plan to move forward, we have a “keep up” budget that will only allow us to start, but not finish, several key projects in our area. For instance:

- Without additional funding, we will be unable to complete the North Spokane Corridor.
- The planning is complete for the widening and dividing of State Route 270 from Pullman to

the state line. Without additional funding, don’t look for construction to begin.

- Current budgeting provides for the design and right-of-way purchase to widen I-90 from Spokane to Idaho. The actual widening, however, won’t happen without new revenues.

In August, I attended the groundbreaking ceremony marking the beginning of construction of the first segment of the North Spokane Corridor. I hope that, before too many more years have passed, I can help celebrate the completion of the entire project.

To end on an upbeat note: By the time you are reading this, we will most likely have had the ribbon-cutting ceremony marking the official completion of the Sprague overpass project on I-90. This project, which began a few years ago, was completed on-schedule and on-budget.

Capital budget good for Spokane

The 3rd legislative district will benefit from a number of projects funded by the state’s \$2.5 billion capital construction budget for 2001-2003. The largest single allocation, more than \$15 million, is for construction at the Spokane Combined Public Safety Training Center. Other projects funded by the capital budget include the Fox Theater project and West Central Community Center; design of new academic buildings at the Spokane campus of WSU; a new student service center at Spokane Community College; and funding for the Centennial Trail, Spokane Children’s Home Society, Spokane Parks & Recreation, and the Spokane Symphony.

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Report from Olympia

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